OMNI - reported

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Subject: Durham, N.C.-Based Cigarette Maker Touts Safer Smoke

Please note the quotes at the end by Dr. Stuart Bondurant and the retailer who said her one customer who bought a pack returned it because he didn't like the taste.

Durham, N.C.-Based Cigarette Maker Touts Safer Smoke
By Catherine Clabby, The News & Observer, Raleigh, N.C.
Knight Ridder/Tribune Business News

Dec. 11--DURHAM, N.C.--No cigarette ad has ever read quite like the one that Vector Tobacco is using to launch Omni, its new "reduced carcinogen" brand of smokes.

"Smoking is addictive and hazardous to your health," Bennett S. LeBow, Vector's top executive, writes in an "open letter" to smokers.
"We do not encourage anyone to smoke. But, we strongly believe that if you do smoke, Omni is the best alternative."

The ad is part of Vector's push to convince the world that science can make less risky cigarettes, based on innovations made in a former Liggett & Myers laboratory in downtown Durham. Many public health experts aren't buying Vector's pitch, stressing that all cigarettes have dangers and that smokers don't have enough data to assess Omni's full health effects.

"Historically, death and disease are related to tobacco products. Nothing there has changed," said Dr. Randolph Smoak, a South Carolina surgeon and past president of the American Medical Association. "We think this is nothing more than a marketing tool."

But Vector executives expect that consumers will be responsive to the promise of reduced risk from the newly engineered cigarettes. And they are leaning heavily on the language of chemistry and statistics to make their sell.

Today, Vector will release data detailing how Omni smoke contains lower levels of several compounds tied to lung cancers. Because that won't prove Omni is less likely to cause disease, the company plans more studies. Vector also will pay for research on how Omni smoke affects human cells, including studies at a Duke University nicotine research center run by smoking cessation scientist Jed Rose.

"We are trying to separate ourselves from the other companies and their decades of tricks," said Tony Albino, a onetime cancer researcher who is now Vector's vice president for public health affairs.

Omni is one of several "safer" cigarette brands being sold or under development in the United States. But Vector contends that Omni is unlike any cigarette ever marketed. Chemists led by N.C. State University faculty member Robert Bereman have tinkered with nearly all parts of the product.

To reduce toxins, Bereman said, Vector changed the paper used to wrap the cigarette, its filter, its blend of tobacco, even how tobacco leaves are cut. They didn't alter any tobacco leaf DNA. But the biggest changes do occur at the molecular level.

Bereman and a team of 25 chemists built on a plan for a safer cigarette that Liggett & Meyers scientists created in the 1970s. Back then, they used a chemical catalyst containing the metal palladium to create chemical reactions that reduce some carcinogens in cigarette smoke. Several people, including company insiders, said their findings were shelved at a time when the industry refused to admit it knew smoking was deadly.

LeBow bought Liggett in 1985 and later was the first cigarette executive to admit that his product is addictive and deadly. His company launched Vector Tobacco last year to develop "less hazardous" smokes, including a no-nicotine brand expected to hit the market next year.

Bereman got involved with LeBow's company in 2000, after a former NCSU student of his, then working for Liggett Tobacco, asked him to review the patent records from the 1970s. Bereman, whose specialty is inorganic chemistry, joined Vector Tobacco as vice president of chemical research in January. His team went to work on several new research instruments that Vector purchased for the old Liggett labs, modified the techniques created in the 1970s and developed a second catalyst.

Omni, he said, uses two catalysts to alter both the smoke people inhale and the even dirtier smoke that lighted cigarettes emit. Vector says the catalysts in Omni cut levels of significant carcinogens such as polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons, nitrosamines and catechols by 15 to 60 percent compared with best selling premium cigarettes. The filter reduces levels of volatile organics such as benzene, acetone and pyridine.

"People shouldn't smoke," Bereman said during a quick tour of Vector's yellow-tiled lab building last week. "But the bottom line is some people won't quit. At least this reduces their exposure."

Kenneth E. Warner, director of the University of Michigan's Tobacco Research Network, sees Omni, which is already on store shelves in North Carolina, in a much more skeptical light.

Cigarette makers have long used technology to try to ease people's fears about dangers from lighting up, he said. In the 1950s, as scientific evidence against smoking mounted, the companies attached filters to their brands. In the 1970s, as anti-smoking campaigns heated up, tobacco companies marketed cigarettes promising lower doses of tar and nicotine in every cellophane-wrapped pack.

"This could be viewed by consumers as a close substitute to the real thing, giving them an alternative to quitting. Many may switch and continue to smoke," Warner said.

Vector plans to continuously modify Omni as it finds new means to reduce toxins in cigarette smoke. It has already filed for three patents based on its work on Omni, which for now is being produced on two cigarette machines set up in a mostly vacant Liggett factory across from the Main Street research building.

Vector isn't releasing sales figures, but Bereman says distributors have placed more orders and the company will expand production next month in a renovated plant in Roxboro.

Merelle Cook, a clerk at a Kerr Drug on Hillandale Road in Durham, said she had only sold one pack from a display touting fewer carcinogens and a premium flavor. That buyer, she said, returned the pack because he didn't like the taste.

Public health researchers in recent years have expected the tobacco industry to develop and market more so-called safer cigarettes. In February, an Institute of Medicine committee issued a report assessing the scientific basis for any harm reduction in the commercial movement at the request of the U.S. Food and Drug Administration.

Dr. Stuart Bondurant, the former dean of medicine at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, led that committee, which concluded that harm reduction in cigarettes is feasible. But it emphasized that no products have been proven to reduce the frequent incidence of heart disease, emphysema, vascular disease or lung cancer among smokers. It also called for long-term studies and government regulation of manufacturers' claims. But government hasn't stepped forward.

Cigarette smoking remains a leading cause of preventable death, taking 430,000 lives in the United States each year.

Now that Omni and other products are on the market, Bondurant said consumers are left having to handle much of that assessment for themselves, without adequate scientific evidence. That means they need to ask tough questions.

"I believe that a less harmful cigarette could be developed and could withstand rigorous scientific review. There are enough people addicted to cigarettes for it to be worth the risk of going ahead and making it," he said. "But the question people really should ask is not just what is left out, but what is left in?"

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